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ABSTRACT

The reading scores of urban disadvantaged students have risen over the past 15 years, which may be attributable to special programs which have focused on strengthening the rudimentary skills. Whether reading achievement is dependent on students' mastery of standard English is an unresolved issue, but a number of instructional methods have been developed to alleviate the problems that dialect speakers may experience without necessarily stigmatizing students or coming into destructive conflict with the students' social and cultural difference. One method is to create stories from the children's oral language so that the reading material reflects their syntax, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Research indicates that what is most important to effective reading programs for all students is: quality of teachers and their belief in the students' ability to read; their creation of a literate, stimulating environment, and their commitment of a significant amount of "engaged" time to active reading instruction. Reading develops out of students' skills in speaking and listening, and is helped by practice in writing. Because students' background knowledge determines how easily they will grasp the meaning of what they read, they should be deliberately prepared for the reading assignment. Discussion before and after reading exercises can be crucial. Ability grouping may not be advantageous for the instruction of low ability students. (KH)

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TEACHING BEGINNING READING TO DIALECT SPEAKERS

"To succeed at reading, children need a basic vocabulary, some knowledge of the world around them, and the ability to talk about what they know."
What Works, U.S. Department of Education.

National Trends in Reading

Reading scores for all students have improved since the early 1970s, and the scores of students in urban disadvantaged communities (areas with a high proportion of residents on welfare or unemployed) have been part of this trend. The proportion of students in these communities lacking rudimentary reading skills has been reduced from 25 percent in 1971 to 12 percent (about 46,000 students) in 1984, according to the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP, 1985).*

The rising reading scores of urban disadvantaged students over the past 15 years can be attributed to the special programs of the last decade, most of which focused on strengthening the rudimentary skills (NAEP, 1985). However, the NAEP's most recent score indicate that the gains may be tapering off, possibly because these special programs are being cut.

Instructional Methods

One prominent instructional issue in many schools serving urban disadvantaged students is whether reading achievement is dependent on students' mastery of standard English. The issue is especially salient when teaching speakers of Black English, "Spanglish," or an Appalachian dialect, all largely considered to be the language of low income students.

Every child enters school with a rich oral language experience. Nonetheless, students who are not fluent in standard English may have linguistic and social problems that interfere with learning. At a linguistic level, their native dialect may block their ability to read, speak, and write standard English. Although some researchers have argued that the syntactical differences between Black English and standard English are so important that Black English should be treated as a foreign language, others have tried to demonstrate that a background in Black English does not necessarily interfere with reading standard English. To alleviate any interference that Black English or other dialect speakers may experience, specific teaching methods, drawn from working with foreign language students, are available. For example, teachers may point out differences in grammar, syntax, semantics, and pronounciation that may confuse students in reading and understanding a standard English text. Creating stories from the children's oral language so that the reading material reflects their syntax, vocabulary, and sentence structure is also useful in beginning to teach reading (Anderson & Webb, 1986; Dummett, 1984).

There have been analyses of how the social implications of Black English can be both the cause and expression of social distance and conflict in the classroom arising

*The NAEP reports scores for different social classes of communities without offering information on the racial, ethnic, or language background of students in these communities. Similarly, NAEP statistics on the performance of racial and ethnic minorities are not further divided by social class. The NAEP data thus give the impression that black or Hispanic students perform uniformly, when, actually, great variations are likely in the performances of each group, largely dependent on the students' social class. In fact, the increasing number of minorities who are becoming either middle class or extremely poor may be widening the range of achievement within each racial or ethnic group.

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out of: (1) the conflicting value systems of teachers and students; (2) students' peer group resistance to becoming part of the white mainstream culture; (3) teachers' stigmatization of students who speak Black English, and treatment of them different from the way they treat white students and black middle class students who speak standard English (Dummett, 1984).

Because social difference can interfere with effective instruction, many argue that teachers' attitudes must be changed, and their belief that the children's dialect should be "stamped out" or "corrected" must be replaced with a knowledge of and respect for the integrity of these dialects.

Effective Reading Programs

Although some students need more instructional attention than others, and students who are dialect speakers may need extra attention, *good reading instruction for standard English speakers is good reading instruction for all students.* A large study comparing approaches to teaching beginning reading found that only about 3 percent of the variation in reading achievement at the end of the first grade was attributable to the overall approach of the program (Lohnes & Gray, 1972). Thus, most researchers now assume that what is far more important is the quality of teachers: their belief in the students' ability to read; their creation of a literate, stimulating environment; and their commitment of a significant amount of "engaged" time to active reading instruction (Anderson, et al., 1985). In fact, most techniques devised specifically for teaching "low ability" readers, or used most often with this group, are less effective than the methods created for good readers.

Dividing up the process of reading into many isolated skills and then having students master each separate skill before moving into reading meaningful material has proved of doubtful value. Workbook pages and skill sheets generally bore students and have been shown to do little to improve their reading. The value of students' reading words on lists or flash cards, deprived of meaningful contexts, is also negligible. On the other hand, using the children's oral background by having them create stories shows a respect for their background at the same time as it uses the ideas, objects, and events of their lives; familiarity with the content of the story always helps to create a strong reading vocabulary (Heath, 1983).

Using the Related Skills of Listening, Speaking, and Writing to Enhance Reading

Reading develops on the foundation of students' skills in speaking and listening, and is helped by practice in writing. "When children learn to read, they are making a transition from spoken to written language. Reading instruction builds on conversational skills: the better children are at spoken language, the more successfully they will learn to read written language" (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, p. 15). Children who have been read to, and who participate in discussion at home, become readers with little trouble. Good reading programs encourage parents to read and talk to their children, and include many periods in which the teacher reads to the children.

Good reading programs also offer many opportunities for student writing, since writing aids reading in a number of ways. Writing helps promote a child's general language ability. When students' home language is a dialect, writing bridges the gap to reading in standard English. Finally, writing creates a natural tie with the written text, giving readers "the eye of the writer" (Strickland, 1986).

Reading Comprehension and Phonetics

Three inextricably related language cue systems are involved in understanding any reading material: (1) letter/sound relationships (phonics), (2) word meanings, and (3) language structure.

Despite the importance of phonics to pronunciation and meaning, and so to learning to read, a phonics approach alone is insufficient and does not lead to reading easily and with understanding. Word meaning is also constructed through a readers' knowledge of language structure, alternative word meanings, and the reader's background experience that confirms his or her choice of the correct word (Crismore, 1985; Stickland, 1986).

Reading Comprehension and Context

Students' background knowledge determines how easily they will grasp the meaning of what they read. "Students read more deftly when the passage describes events, people and places of which the students have some prior knowledge" (U.S. Department of Education, 1986), p. 53).

Even when the words or concepts are understood, the complexity of the sentence structure may appear to remove the text from the students' experience. This is especially so with dialect speakers, who learned word ordering rules different from those of standard English.

Reading is learned most easily and understood best when it entertains, instructs, or directs. Good books, traffic signs, and package instructions for playing a game or baking a cake are all good ways of teaching beginning reading in a way that stresses comprehension (Anderson, et al., 1985; Heath, 1983). Whatever the reading material, the key is to present words as soon as possible in their meaningful context.

Discussion Before and After

Students' comprehension of words, concepts, or sentence structure can be increased through preparation for the reading assignment. Teachers can point out the context of the reading material, the locale, even the perspective from which the story is told.

Discussions after reading achieve several purposes: checking students' understanding of what they have just read, highlighting meanings and ideas they should look for in the future, and laying a groundwork for later literary appreciation, such as for theme and style.

Because of the proven direct effect of such discussion on reading comprehension, as well as the indirect effects through enhancing speaking skills, parents should be encouraged to talk about what they read to their children, as well as to discuss what the children themselves read (Anderson, et al., 1985).

Some Cautions About Reading Ability Groups

Many teachers believe that dividing a class into reading groups based on ability or achievement allows them to match the pacing of their lessons more exactly with their children's needs. In fact, ability groupings can be good for students chosen to be in high ability groups, but those chosen for the low ability groups are often stigmatized and their chances of moving out of the low groups are slim.

Analyses of classroom behavior show that teachers tend to teach their high and low ability students differently, in ways that leave the low ability students at a clear disadvantage, particularly in their reading comprehension.

Despite the fact that reading silently before reading aloud has been shown to improve comprehension, this silent reading period is often omitted. Moreover, low ability children do relatively more reading aloud and less silent reading. (In one study of 600 first graders, low ability students read aloud 90 percent of the time, while high ability students read aloud only 40 percent of the reading time [Collins, 1980; cited in Anderson, et al., 1985].)

Low ability students also tend to be given fewer stories to read and instead are given words on lists or flash cards, that is, deprived of exactly the meaningful context which they need even more than their high ability schoolmates.

When reading aloud, low ability students also appear to be helped with pronunciation while high ability students are helped with meaning. This repeated stopping for pronunciation correction further impedes the comprehension of low ability students.

Finally, although many low ability students need more help from their teachers than do high ability students, teachers' time is generally divided equally among different reading groups (Anderson, et al., 1985).

To improve the reading of urban students who speak a low status dialect:

Parents should
- be encouraged to read and talk to their children.

Teachers should
- show respect for the students' language background.
- offer many opportunities for students to write.
- prepare for silent reading with a discussion of the new words, concepts, and sentence complexity to appear.
- devote a significant amount of reading time to silent reading.
- ignore pronunciation mistakes whenever possible and focus on meaning.

Reading groups should
- be based on criteria other than ability.
- be switched periodically.
- be decreased in time, and the time devoted to whole group instruction should be increased.

—Carol Ascher

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